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SUBJECT: ANTI-CNS LEAFLETS STIR IN MUSLIM ISSUES

REF: (06) CHIANG MAI 161 (IRAQ IS ABOUT OIL, THAI ISLAMIC OFFICIAL TELLS NORTHERN MUSLIM LEADERS)

¶11. Summary. Leaflets that appear to have originated in Chiang Rai and distributed in the northern region attack the Council for National Security (CNS) for serving Muslim interests. Despite this provocative message, the leaflets have caused little concern among Consulate contacts, including the Muslim community. End Summary.

¶12. A former Thai Rak Thai (TRT) MP in Chiang Rai reported that a series of anti-CNS leaflets were sent to local police stations in the province around Jan. 11 claiming that the Sept. 19 coup was meant to serve Muslim interests. The leaflets, issued by "Buddhists" and "Buddhist Monks", noted that CNS chairman Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratkalin and Interior Minister Aree Wongarya are Muslims and alleged that the upcoming Constitution would be based on an Islamic model. The leaflets also attacked Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont's apology to southern Muslims for past government mishandling in that region.

¶13. According to the "Manager On-Line" news service, the leaflets were first distributed Jan. 4 at a gathering in honor of revered Thai monk Khruba Boonchum at a temple in Chiang Saen district, Chiang Rai. The leaflets were later reported in Chiang Mai, Phitsanulok and Chiang Rai.

¶14. Local contacts, including journalists, politicians, and Muslims, told the Consulate that the seemingly divisive message was unlikely to disrupt the generally calm relationship between Buddhist and Muslim communities in the north. One of the journalists stated that a Buddhist backlash seemed unlikely, but wondered whether the message might get drawn into the rivalry between two Buddhist sects, one seen as royalist and the other linked to Thaksin.

¶15. Muslim leaders in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son said they had heard of but not seen copies of the leaflet; neither expressed much concern over a possible impact on the mainstream Thai Muslim community. However, Mae Sariang Imam Suriya Aramwong speculated that the message could become an element in the current power struggle within the national Muslim hierarchy against the incumbent Chularajamontri, Thailand's highest ranking Islamic official (reftel).

¶16. Comment: Unlike earlier anti-CNS leaflets reported in northern Thailand, this new version is not overtly pro-Thaksin. While the leaflets seem to have drawn little attention from authorities or the media, the use of religious divisions to attack the interim government could provide opportunities for fringe groups to further stir the political brew and exacerbate distrust among Buddhists and Muslims.

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